

Could the Peking University *Laozi* 老子 really be a forgery?

Some skeptical remarks*

Thies Staack (University of Heidelberg)

In an article that was recently published in *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, Professor Xing Wen 邢文 of Dartmouth College argues that the *Laozi* 老子 from the Peking University collection of Han bamboo slips is without doubt a forgery.¹ To prove this, Xing forwards several arguments relating to the two main areas “outer appearance/material design” (*xingzhi* 形制) and “calligraphy” (*shufa* 書法). Although the article indeed uncovers certain problems of the Peking University *Laozi* edition,² the forwarded arguments are insufficient to support the claim for a forgery, as will be shown in the following. To facilitate reference to Xing’s article, the discussion in this paper follows the six main arguments he forwards (three each for the two areas outer appearance/material design and calligraphy).

1. Verso lines

After an article published in 2011 had initiated discussion of the verso line phenomenon,³ several researchers have further elaborated on it in the following years.⁴ One of the most

* On 29 July 2016, Professor Xing Wen 邢文 presented the findings of his analysis of the Peking University *Laozi* for discussion on a workshop at New York University, to which he also kindly invited the author of this paper. Unfortunately, the latter was not able to attend. The present paper may be seen as a belated substitute for a contribution to that workshop. The author would like to thank Michael Friedrich, Enno Giele, Hsing I-tien (邢義田) and Tong Chun Fung (唐俊峰) for various helpful comments on an earlier draft. This paper emerged from the Heidelberg Collaborative Research Centre 933 “Material Text Cultures. Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies” (Subproject B09 “Bamboo and Wood as Writing Materials in Early China”). The CRC 933 is financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

¹ Xing Wen 邢文, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei” 北大簡《老子》辨偽, *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, 8-8-2016, 16. If not stated otherwise all references to Xing Wen’s analysis in the present paper are according to that article. The Peking University *Laozi* was published in Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 北京大學出土文獻研究所 ed., *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (er)* 北京大學藏西漢竹書(貳) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012) (hereafter “*Beida Laozi*”).

² Throughout this article, “(*Laozi*) edition” refers to the above-mentioned book containing not only the actual edition of the Peking University *Laozi* text, but also the photographs of the slips, the diagrams with the tracings of the slips’ verso, etc.

³ Sun Peiyang 孫沛陽, “Jiance bei huaxian chutan” 簡冊背劃綫初探, *Chutu wenxian yu guwenzi yanjiu* 出土文獻與古文字研究 4 (2011), 449–62.

⁴ The most recent examples to the author’s knowledge are chapter 6 of Jia Lianxiang 賈連翔, *Zhanguo zhushu xingzhi ji xiangguan wenti yanjiu – Yi Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian wei zhongxin* 戰國竹書形制及

influential works was published by one of the editors of the Peking University manuscripts as part of the *Laozi* edition.⁵ The importance of that piece of scholarship lay mainly with the proposal that the verso lines on the Peking University *Laozi* slips had been applied to bamboo culm segments of a certain length in form of “spiral-shaped lines” (*luoxuan zhuang de huaxian* 螺旋狀的劃綫) before the culms were split into individual bamboo slips. It has meanwhile been shown that the same method of application was probably also used on some of the bamboo slips from the collections of Tsinghua University and Yuelu Academy.⁶ Xing Wen argues that the verso lines as they are displayed in form of tracings in the diagrams supplied in the Peking University *Laozi* edition do not at all support the two conclusions that a) the line sections⁷ on neighboring slips can usually be linked to form continuous verso lines and that b) the lines were applied by the method just described. He notes certain “gaps” (*cuowei* 錯位) between the line sections on neighboring slips and further points out that the inclination of the line sections differs,⁸ which he both considers as speaking against the proposal of the editors.

Let us first focus on the differences in inclination of the line sections. This observation is certainly correct as far as the diagrams with the tracings of the verso lines are concerned. If we follow the proposal of the editors about the application of spiral-shaped lines, then these lines are likely not straight but curved. This is suggested by the diagram supplied in the edition⁹ and also by photographs of the verso of some of the Tsinghua University and the Yuelu Academy slips, where the lines were apparently applied in the same way (see for example fig. 1 below).

相關問題研究——以清華大學藏戰國竹簡爲中心 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2015), as well as Thies Staack, “Identifying Codicological Sub-units in Bamboo Manuscripts: Verso Lines Revisited,” *Manuscript Cultures* 8 (2016), 157–86. See n. 4 of the latter for a list of nine other publications discussing the verso lines after Sun Peiyang’s 2011 article.

⁵ Han Wei 韓巍, “Xi Han zhushu ‘Laozi’ jianbei huahen de chubu fenxi” 西漢竹書《老子》簡背劃痕的初步分析, in *Beida Laozi*, 227–35.

⁶ See Jia Lianxiang, *Zhanguo zhushu xingzhi ji xiangguan wenti yanjiu*, 88–100 on the Tsinghua University slips and Thies Staack, “Identifying Codicological Sub-units in Bamboo Manuscripts: Verso Lines Revisited,” 168–72 on the Yuelu Academy slips.

⁷ The distinction between “line sections” on individual slips and complete “lines” follows the analogous distinction into *ke/mo huaxian* 刻/墨劃綫 and *jiance bei huaxian* 簡冊背劃綫 in Sun Peiyang, “Jiance bei huaxian chutan,” 449.

⁸ See Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” figs. 3 and 4.

⁹ *Beida Laozi*, 229 (reproduced as fig. 5 in Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei”). The line surrounding the model of the stylized bamboo culm segment is obviously curved.



Fig. 1: Upper half of slips 70 to 95 of the Tsinghua University *Xinian* 繫年.¹⁰

This suffices to demonstrate that for line sections belonging to the same verso line it is in fact very likely to have different inclinations (apart from the fact that the line sections as such are not necessarily entirely straight lines either)—at least if they were applied on culm segments as part of spiral lines. Now the impression one gets from some of the diagrams showing the Peking University *Laozi* verso lines, is that the inclination of the line sections in some cases differs in a way that can hardly be explained by curvature of the whole verso line, for example if the line sections on slips 182 and 183 are compared.¹¹ There are different possible explanations for this. One would be that the person who applied the verso line on the culm segment moved the knife in an unsteady way—due for example to lack of experience or skill—ending up with neither a straight line nor a regular curve. Another explanation would be a certain degree of inaccuracy with regard to the tracings of the verso lines included in the

¹⁰ This is a reproduction of fig. 9 in Thies Staack, “Identifying Codicological Sub-units in Bamboo Manuscripts: Verso Lines Revisited,” 176. The verso line is highlighted in yellow. For further examples of curved verso lines see also figs. 10 to 14 of the same article as well as Jia Lianxiang, *Zhanguo zhushu xingzhi ji xiangguan wenti yanjiu*, 88–100. For the original photographs of that part of the *Xinian* see Li Xueqin 李學勤 and Qinghua daxue chutu wenxian yanjiu yu baohu zhongxin 清華大學出土文獻研究與保護中心 ed., *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian (er)* 清華大學藏戰國竹簡（貳）(Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2011), 23–25.

¹¹ Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” figs. 3 and 4.

edition. The latter possibility indeed seems much more likely with regard to the fact that there is at least one example clearly showing a deviation in the inclination of a line section between the verso photograph and the tracing of one and the same slip—although photographs were only included for the two slips 2 and 124 carrying the titles *Laozi shangjing* 老子上經 and *Laozi xiajing* 老子下經, respectively. If we compare the verso photograph and the verso tracing of slip 124 in the full-scale reconstruction included in the edition as a supplement, it becomes clear that the inclination of the upper line section is different (see fig. 2).

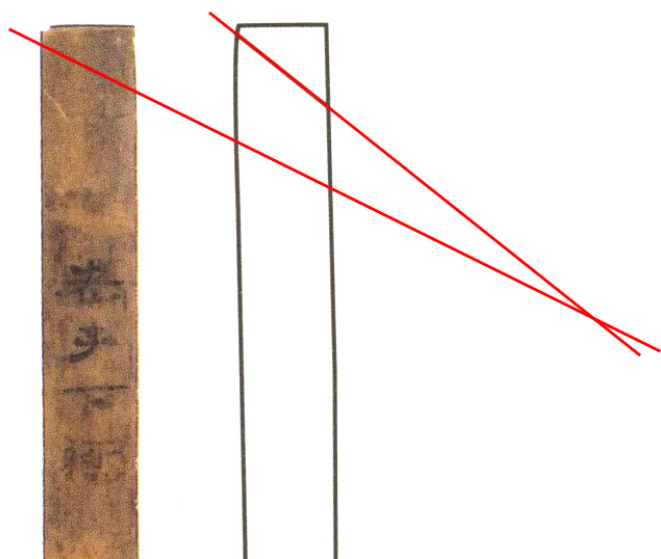


Fig. 2: Different inclination of upper line section in photograph and tracing of slip 124.¹²

This of course has to be a mistake and hints towards the possibility that the accuracy of the verso line tracings may be doubtful for other slips as well. One can only speculate on how exactly the tracings of the verso lines were produced, but in view of the actual findings, the following appears most likely. The edition of the *Laozi* also includes a table describing the position of the line sections on each individual slip with the help of measurements.¹³ For each slip the editors provide the distance measured from the top of the slip to the point where the left and the right end of the respective line section are situated, for example 1.0 and 1.7 cm for slip 19.¹⁴ When producing the diagrams with the tracings, the editors likely used these two measures as end points and connected them with straight lines to produce the line sections. Under these circumstances, slight differences in the measured positions would cause

¹² The lines were highlighted and prolonged in both directions to show that they are far from parallel.

¹³ *Beida Laozi*, 165–71.

¹⁴ This means that the left end of the line section on slip 19 is located 1 cm from the top of the slip, whereas the right end of the line section is located 1.7 cm from the top.

significant differences in the inclination of the respective line sections. This could in fact explain the “irregular” appearance of certain line sections in the diagrams. As far as the discrepancy in inclination between the line section on slip 86 and those on slips 87 to 89 is concerned,¹⁵ the reason for this is simply that the line section on slip 86 belongs to a different verso line than those on slips 87 to 89.¹⁶

As to the observed gaps between line sections on neighboring slips, there are two possible circumstances. The first is that the right end of the line section on slip A is positioned significantly higher (meaning a smaller distance measured from the top of the slip) than the left end of the line section on the following slip B. Depending on the size of the gap, probable causes are removal of one or more slips after application of the verso line or abrasion on the side of the slips in the course of further processing.¹⁷

The second possible circumstance is that the right end of the line section on slip A is positioned significantly lower (meaning a larger distance measured from the top of the slip) than the left end of the line section on the following slip B. This means that the top end of slip B would be situated at a lower position than the top end of the preceding slip A, if the slips are aligned strictly according to the verso line. Exactly this appears to be the case for many line sections on slips 19 to 34 and slips 48 to 67—at least when observing the varying position of the top ends in figs. 6 and 7 of Xing Wen’s article. However, the table with the measurements in the *Laozi* edition does not confirm this impression for any of the slips 19 to 34. Therefore, the way the slips are positioned in Xing Wen’s fig. 6 does in fact not reflect the data provided by the edition. But for slips 48 to 67 we actually find examples for such gaps between line sections on slips 48–49 (right end on 48: 10.0, left end on 49: 9.9), slips 61–62 (right end on 61: 10.1, left end on 62: 9.9) and slips 62–63 (right end on 62: 10.4, left end on 63: 10.2). How could these gaps be explained? One possibility would be that from some of the slips a small portion at the very top was removed after application of the verso line, for example by abrasion during processing. However, this seems unlikely since slips 61, 62 and 63 have exactly the same length (32.1 cm).¹⁸ A second possibility is that the measurements provided in the table are in these cases not entirely accurate.

¹⁵ Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” fig. 4.

¹⁶ See *Beida Laozi*, 113, 228 and 230–31. For another example of this kind of misunderstanding see section 2 below.

¹⁷ Both possibilities were mentioned in Sun Peiyang, “Jiance bei huaxian chutan,” 456–57.

¹⁸ *Beida Laozi*, 167. As slip 49 is fragmented, its complete length is unknown.

As can be seen, some of the observations on the verso lines made by Xing could not be easily explained—that is to say, if the data in the table and the diagrams with the tracings of the verso lines do in fact accurately reflect the position of the line sections on the original slips. After all, our ground for discussion is limited to these two sources. The natural thing to do, if inconsistencies in the table and/or the diagrams are discovered, would be to check the original slips, to see if the table and/or the diagrams are indeed correct. To jump to the conclusion that the verso lines were forged from the described inconsistencies, which might likewise be explained by inaccuracies or mistakes during measuring, appears unjustified. As has been shown, such inaccuracies or mistakes might easily creep in and in some cases definitely occurred.¹⁹ It is indeed unfortunate that none of the editions of the Peking University Han slips published so far contains actual photos of the verso for all slips. It seems that publication of these materials could be a good way for the editors to clarify matters and enable readers to determine if the observations made by Xing still hold when observing the original slips, even if only with the help of photographs.

2. “Length” of the slips

Xing claims that the length of the slips in the Peking University *Laozi* is another indicator for the slips to be forgeries, as this length varies widely according to his observations. In an article responding to Xing’s argument, Li Kai 李開 of Nanjing University has already pointed out other examples where the length of slips obviously varied to a certain degree inside the same manuscript, citing the Guodian 郭店 *Laozi* A as an example.²⁰ In response to Li, Xing argued that the variation in length for said Guodian slips is very small (about 0.2 cm or 0.6% of the overall length of the slips), whereas it is much more obvious in the Peking University *Laozi*.²¹ To demonstrate the variation in slip length, Xing assembled slips 19 to 34 and slips

¹⁹ Comparing the position of the lower line section on slip 35 in the full-scale tracing included in the edition as supplement vs. the reduced-size tracing (*Beida Laozi*, 112) only the latter seems to be in accord with the description in text-form provided in *Beida Laozi*, 230. This is only one of numerous slight differences between the full-scale and the reduced-size tracings most often manifest in the varying distance in which two or more pieces of fragmented slips were arranged. In fact, this shows that the two types of tracings were likely produced separately instead of one being an enlarged/downsized but otherwise identical version of the other.

²⁰ Li Kai 李開, “Guanyu Beida jian ‘Laozi’ de bianwei” 關於北大簡《老子》的辨偽, *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, 12-9-2016, 16.

²¹ Xing Wen 邢文, “‘Bianzheng zhi mei’ yu ‘sandian toudi’ – Beida jian ‘Laozi’ zai bianwei” “辯證之美”與“散點透視”——北大簡《老子》再辨偽, *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, 12-9-2016, 16.

48 to 67.²² The way the slips are aligned next to each other in his figures, it really looks as if their length varies beyond all likelihood, especially if comparing slips 48 to 53 and slips 54 to 67 in fig. 7 of Xing Wen's article. However, the figures only show the upper half of the slips, and it is therefore impossible to compare their actual length. If the tracings of the complete slips are put next to each other, the situation looks very different (see fig. 3).

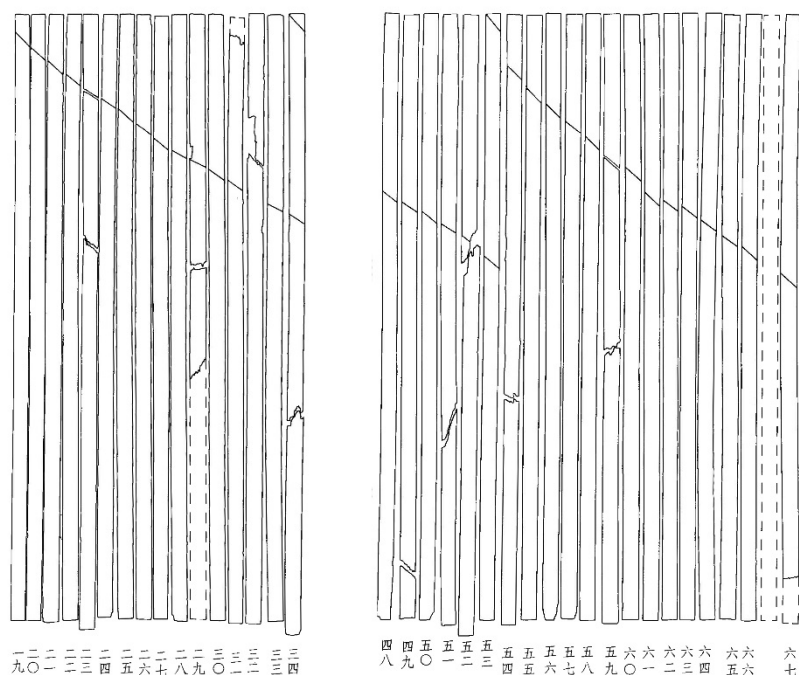


Fig. 3: Slips 19 to 34 (left) and slips 48 to 67 (right).²³

The arrangement of the slips in fig. 1 differs from the one presented by the Peking University editors merely insofar as the distance between the slips was reduced to be able to better compare their length. As can be seen, the differences in length are marginal. There are only six slips that on first sight might appear to be significantly longer than the others to the left or right. These are slips 23, 34, 51, 52, 54 and 59. These are in fact each broken into two (or even three) parts that were not completely joined together in the diagrams, probably in order to make their state of fragmentation visible. Consequently, they appear to be longer than they actually are (or rather, were before they broke apart). The table with the measurements of the slips included in the edition confirms this impression.²⁴ In the group of slips 19 to 34,²⁵ complete slips have a length of 31.9 to 32.2 cm (variance of 0.3 cm). If we add the length of

²² Xing Wen, "Beida jian 'Laozi' bianwei," figs. 6 and 7.

²³ For the original diagrams with the verso tracings see *Beida Laozi*, 111–12.

²⁴ For the table see *Beida Laozi*, 165–71.

²⁵ Xing Wen, "Beida jian 'Laozi' bianwei," fig. 6.

the fragments for the fragmented slips 23, 32 and 34 we get 33.4 cm, 33.8 cm and 33.6 cm, respectively. That exactly these fragmented slips appear to be longer than the complete ones also from the numbers is due to the fact that the overall length of each fragment was measured. If the fragments are to be joined again, these numbers can of course not simply be added up because this does not reflect the way the complete slips would have to be reconstructed. The length of the complete slips must have been significantly lower, very likely around 32 cm. In the group of slips 48 to 67,²⁶ complete slips have a length of 32 to 32.1 cm (variance of only 0.1 cm). Of course, for the fragmented slips 51, 52, 54 and 59 we likewise arrive at greater lengths if the numbers for the fragments are added up: 34.1, 33.9, 32.3 and 33.1, respectively. As can be seen, the variance in length of the Peking University *Laozi* slips (up to 0.3 cm, at least in the part under investigation) actually appears to be very similar to that observable in the Guodian *Laozi* A (0.2 cm, see above).

A point that needs to be made here concerns a problem with the full-scale reconstructions of the two *Laozi* manuscripts showing the recto photographs and the verso tracings, which were included in the edition as supplements. It seems that the recto photographs of some of the slips were not reproduced in the correct scale. As a result of this, some of the slips, for example 135, 136 and 155 appear to be shorter than the following slips 137 and 156, respectively. However, both the table in the appendix²⁷ as well as the full-scale photographs in the “edition proper”²⁸ show that all slips have almost exactly the same length (32.0 or 32.1 cm)—whereas they appear to diverge by 0.5 or even 0.6 cm in the supplement. The verso tracings of these slips on the other side of the supplement seem to accord with the reduced-size tracings in the edition. This again demonstrates the existence of mistakes or inconsistencies.

But what Xing Wen apparently meant with “forgery regarding the length of the bamboo slips” (*zhujian changdu zhi wei* 竹簡長度之偽) and tried to illustrate with figs. 6 and 7, are not peculiar circumstances regarding the length of the bamboo slips, but an apparent deviation in the top alignment of the slips, if these are put into sequence strictly according to the verso lines. Fig. 3 above shows that the line sections on individual slips can in fact usually be linked with the line sections on the neighboring slips, even if the top and bottom ends of the slips are also aligned. The large discrepancy Xing observed between the line sections (or the top ends

²⁶ Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” fig. 7.

²⁷ *Beida Laozi*, 169–70.

²⁸ *Beida Laozi*, 20–23.

of the slips, respectively, depending on which of the two are aligned) on slip 32 and the rest of the slips in fig. 6 of his article (19 to 34) might be explained by the possibility that slip 32 was later inserted into this group, for example because the original slip was somehow defective.²⁹ This could explain the different position of the line section, if there was any. The editors merely state that the slip broke “at the position of the line section.”³⁰ As regards a similar discrepancy between slips 52 and 53 vs. slips 54 to 67,³¹ this is again due to the fact that the line sections on slips 52 and 53 belong to a different verso line than those on 54 to 67 and therefore can of course not be linked.³² To suggest that the Peking University editors invented the separation into groups of slips (according to separate verso lines) to cover up the fact that the line sections do not fit together between groups, appears a bit far-fetched. The existence of these groups or “sets” of slips is grounded in the theory the editors advanced to explain the distributional pattern of the line sections (application of spiral-shaped lines to intact bamboo culm segments), and which has by now been confirmed by observations on other manuscripts (see above). The smaller gaps that are observable in Xing Wen’s figs. 6 and 7 have already been discussed in the above section on the verso lines. Overall, one can at least say that these two figures show a somewhat distorted picture and for this reason cannot lend much support to Xing Wen’s argument.

3. Writing before binding (vs. binding before writing)

The Peking University editors stated that, although the possibility that the *Laozi* slips were first tied together and then written on cannot be excluded, the probability that writing came before binding is much higher.³³ This statement was deemed unfounded by Xing Wen. He suggested that the only reason behind it was the necessity to explain the fact that there are no line sections on slips 84 and 187 of the *Laozi*.³⁴ That certain slips were sorted out due to

²⁹ Cf. cases of replaced or misplaced slips in the Tsinghua University *Xinian*, see He Jin 何晉, “Qianyi jiance zhidu zhong de ‘xulian’ – Yi chutu Zhanguo Qin Han jian wei li” 淺議簡冊制度中的“序連”——以出土戰國秦漢簡爲例, *Jianbo* 簡帛 8 (2013), 465–66.

³⁰ *Beida Laozi*, 166.

³¹ Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” fig. 7.

³² Cf. the diagrams in *Beida Laozi*, 112.

³³ *Beida Laozi*, 234.

³⁴ Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” figs. 1 and 2.

writing mistakes and later replaced by others, as suggested by the editors,³⁵ is, according to Xing's view, only possible under this premise.

First of all, the editors also proposed a second explanation, namely that the respective verso lines might not have been applied to the bamboo culm segments continuously but for some reason a gap in the lines occurred during application. Unlikely as this may seem, this possibility cannot be simply dismissed. Furthermore, certain slips might well have been sorted out and replaced by others after application of the verso line but before writing was even begun. Envisioning the process of splitting a bamboo culm segment into slips it is conceivable that occasionally certain slips were damaged during this process in a way that made them unsuitable for use as writing support. Therefore, the possibility of slips without line sections (as later replacements) to occur is not at all connected to the question of whether writing or binding came first. Both steps might have come after the replacement.

The argument that the production of the Peking University *Laozi* manuscript (indeed probably two separate manuscripts titled *Laozi shangjing* 老子上經 and *Laozi xiajing* 老子下經, respectively) would have been too difficult or impractical, if the more than 200 slips were not tied together before the writing was applied is not really convincing either. In her investigation of the Tsinghua University *Xinian*, Xiao Yunxiao 肖芸曉 has shown that slips produced from the same bamboo culm segment (and belonging to the same verso line) were tied together first and that these units were in a second step combined to form the complete manuscript.³⁶ The same mode of production might have been used for the Peking University *Laozi* as well. One could well imagine a scribe applying writing to the slips produced from one bamboo culm segment, and then tying these together, before proceeding to write on the slips of the next culm segment. Furthermore, to tie together more than 200 (or at least more than 100) slips according to the correct sequence of the text written on them without using such intermediate steps generally also seems far from impossible.

Lastly, the fact that the scribe while writing consistently avoided the positions where the binding strings were attached to the slips is in no way a proof for the assumption that binding came before writing. As the later positions of binding strings are usually marked by notches (*qikou* 契口) applied to the side of the slips, scribes can easily avoid to write at these places,

³⁵ *Beida Laozi*, 233.

³⁶ Xiao Yunxiao 肖芸曉, "Qinghua jian jiance zhidu kaocha" 清華簡簡冊制度考察, M.A. thesis (Wuhan daxue, 2015), 75–79.

thereby preventing writing from being covered.³⁷ The slips of the Peking University *Laozi* were in fact furnished with notches.³⁸

4. Writing on fragments

After a comparison of the character *wu* 無 written above the place where slip 2 of the Peking University *Laozi* is broken with three forms of the same character written on slip 1,³⁹ Xing Wen concluded that the character on slip 2 must have been written only after the slip had broken apart. The reason for this claim is that the character form on slip 2 appears to be complete but shows a comparatively short right-falling stroke on the bottom right corner that in fact seems to stop exactly at the place where the slip is broken. In contrast to this, the character forms on slip 1 all show a much longer stroke in the bottom right corner. Xing argues that if the form on slip 2 had been written before the slip broke apart, the bottom right stroke should look fragmented, but obviously the stroke was written as a shorter stroke on purpose. Speaking against this hypothesis is the fact that there are other instances of the character *wu* 無 that are nowhere near a place of fragmentation but that are written with the exact same short stroke in the bottom right corner. The following four character forms on slips 14, 56, 129 and 132 may suffice as counter examples (see fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Form of the character *wu* 無 on slip 10 vs. other forms of the same character.⁴⁰

³⁷ Li Tianhong 李天虹, *Guodian zhujian “Xing zi ming chu” yanjiu* 郭店竹簡《性自命出》研究 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 6–8.

³⁸ *Beida Laozi*, 121.

³⁹ Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” figs. 10 and 11.

⁴⁰ The numbers below the character forms indicate the number of the slip followed by the number of the character on that slip.

5. Rejoining a fragmented character

As pointed out correctly by Xing, the second of the five occurrences of the character *de* 得 on slip 52 looks very different from the other four.⁴¹ The apparent reason for this is that the former is the result of joining the two fragments slip 52 originally consisted of—the left and the bottom part of the character can be found on the lower fragment, the top right part on the upper fragment.⁴² Xing describes five different points in which the reconstructed character form differs from the other four on the same slip. The most important of these differences according to his view is the placement of the character components referred to as points 2 and 3—these are actually the parts of the character that are situated on the upper fragment of slip 52. Now Xing reasonably assumes that the two photographs showing the recto of the two fragments of slip 52 were not joined together correctly.⁴³ He goes on to argue that the two fragments would actually have to be placed much further apart from each other (vertically) than this is the case in the edition. To place the fragments as proposed by Xing would indeed mean that there is no way that the two parts of the character *de* 得 could be joined to form a complete character. Therefore, Xing concludes that the editors must have placed the photographs of the recto of the fragments incorrectly on purpose to come close to the result the supposed “forger had failed to achieve.”

There are two problems regarding these conclusions. First, if the two fragments of slip 52 are placed as proposed by Xing (and actually done by the editors in the diagrams with the tracings of the verso lines), the resulting complete slip would be much longer than the other slips of the *Laozi* (see fig. 3 above). Second, the left and right sides of the fragments were in fact not correctly aligned in the enlarged photograph showing their recto, as the upper fragment is positioned further to the right than the lower one (see fig. 5). This seems to be the real cause behind the somehow awkward appearance of the reconstructed form of the character *de* 得.

⁴¹ Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” fig. 12.

⁴² Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” fig. 13.3.

⁴³ *Beida Laozi*, 49.



Fig. 5: Detail of slip 52.⁴⁴

If one adjusts the horizontal and vertical displacement, the result is the following (see fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Detail of slip 52 (after re-positioning of fragments by the author).

It becomes clear that the two fragments originally must have partly overlapped. With the fragments in the correct position (or at least closer to that ideal), the fragmented form of the character *de* 得 looks much more similar to the other four forms on slip 52 (see fig. 7).

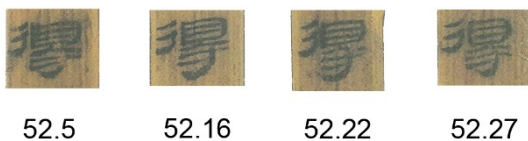


Fig. 7: Other forms of the character *de* 得 on slip 52.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ For the original photograph see *Beida Laozi*, 49. The red lines were added for clarification.

Apparently, some parts of the character are not visible anymore because additional small fragments of bamboo were lost, for example, one large fragment that must have been situated in the slightly differently colored area on the right side of the two fragments (see fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Detail of slip 52 (after re-positioning of fragments by the author) with indication of hypothetical lost fragment(s).⁴⁶

6. “Secondary forgery”

The reason for Xing to assume that the editors intentionally manipulated the placement of the two fragments of slip 52 is the fact that their reconstruction of the fragmented character *de* 得 on the recto of slip 52⁴⁷ does not accord with the way they placed the fragments in the diagrams showing the tracings of the verso lines.⁴⁸ In the latter, the fragments are much further apart from each other.⁴⁹ However, Xing suggests that the placement shown in the diagrams is actually the correct one.

As has already been demonstrated in section 5 above, the reconstructed slip 52 would actually be too long, if Xing’s proposal is followed. Now this clearly shows two things. First, none of the slightly different placements of the two fragments of slip 52 shown in the edition of the Peking University *Laozi* can actually be considered an accurate reconstruction of their

⁴⁵ Cf. Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” fig. 12.

⁴⁶ The area where the missing fragment(s) must have been positioned is marked with the black square.

⁴⁷ *Beida Laozi*, 49.

⁴⁸ *Beida Laozi*, 112.

⁴⁹ Cf. Xing Wen, “Beida jian ‘Laozi’ bianwei,” figs. 13.3 and 14.1.

original relative position.⁵⁰ Second, although this defect can easily be repaired by adjusting the placement of the fragments, there remains a problem with the diagram showing the tracing of the verso line section for slip 52—and likewise the full-scale tracing in the supplement. The left part of such a line section is clearly indicated on the upper fragment. After correct placement of the fragments, we would actually expect to find traces of a verso line section on the lower fragment of slip 52 as well. However, neither the verso tracings nor the table in the appendix of the edition provide any hint for its existence. In this case again, one would have to check the original slips if there really is no such line section visible. It is not at all unlikely that the part of the line section on the lower fragment of slip 52 was merely not recorded by mistake.

To sum up, some of the observations made by Xing are important and valuable because they clearly show (in the case of the rejoined fragmented character) or at least hint on (in the case of the verso lines) certain mistakes or inconsistencies in the *Laozi* edition. Some additional examples of inconsistencies—inclination of verso lines according to the photographs vs. the tracings, and scale of the “full-scale” photographs in the supplement vs. the edition proper—have been described in this paper. Such things are of course regrettable and should be pointed out. But to be fair, a perfect edition without any mistakes has probably seldom (if ever) been accomplished. And as has been shown, none of Xing Wen’s observations on the *Laozi* edition can bear witness to the *Laozi* slips being the product of forgery. Without an investigation of the verso lines on the original slips (or at least photographs of those), such a claim is certainly unjustified. And even if the originals should confirm that the tracings and the numbers in the table are correct, this would not directly lead to the conclusion that the Peking University *Laozi* is a forgery. However, Xing Wen’s article calls to account the Peking University editors, because to resolve the remaining questions photos of the verso of the *Laozi* slips need to be published. The arguments presented in this paper do of course not prove that the Peking University *Laozi* is not a forgery. They can merely serve to disprove or at least put into perspective the arguments advanced to claim that it *is* a forgery. To support such a claim—especially if it is paired with rather serious allegations towards the Peking University editors—much more substantial evidence would be needed.

⁵⁰ For the different placements see *Beida Laozi*, 9, 49, 112.

Postscript

After this article was completed, I learnt that Christopher Foster also responds to Xing Wen's criticism in a section of a forthcoming article that is going to be published in *Early China* 40. As our papers were drafted independently, we have agreed to maintain this independence and not elaborate on each other's work. Foster's response to Xing Wen offers many of the same arguments described above and I encourage the reader to consult his article for a complementary view once it is published.

Furthermore, Han Wei 韓巍 has confirmed some of the suspicions on overlooked verso lines/inaccuracies regarding the tracings that are forwarded in this article—e.g. for slips 32b and 52b—during personal communication in October 2016 and in a paper he recently presented at the “Beijing Forum” (*Beijing luntan* 北京論壇) on 4–6 November 2016. His work contains a few additional verso photographs and is going to be published in *Jianbo Laozi yu daojia sixiang huiyi lunwenji* 簡帛老子與道家思想會議論文集 under the title “Zai lun Beida Han jian ‘Laozi’ de jianbei huahen – Jian shi dui Han jian ‘Laozi’ zhenwei de ‘zhiyi’” 再論北大漢簡《老子》的簡背劃痕——兼釋對漢簡《老子》真偽的“質疑”.

Last but not least, Yao Xiao'ou 姚小鷗 has meanwhile published a response to Xing Wen, which makes some of the same points described in sections 4 to 6 of the present article, see “You pinjie yu shufa kan zhenwei – Yu Xing Wen xiansheng shangque” 由拼接與書法看真偽——與邢文先生商榷, *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, 12-12-2016, 16. That article was followed by a response of Xing Wen only a week later, see his “Jishu shufa xue yu jiandu bianwei – Da Yao Xiao'ou xiansheng” 技術書法學與簡牘辨偽——答姚小鷗先生, *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, 19-12-2016, 16.

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